

Northeastern Illinois University

**The Superhighway Comes to Chicago:
A History of the Interstate Highway System with the
City of Chicago, 1940-1960**

Submitted to Professor S. Riess

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Chicago, Illinois

December 12, 2002

Introduction

Today, the interstate highway system is taken for granted as an integral component of a society that is highly dependent on the automobile. Despite the fact that this network of over forty thousand miles of roadways is the largest public works undertaking in history, the average motorist does not give a second thought to the fact that he is able to drive from Boston to Los Angeles without ever encountering a stop light or cross traffic, let alone fretting about fording rivers or crossing mountain ranges. But, of course, a half century ago, there were no such roads. Traffic moved slowly through congested and compacted cities. Goods tended to be shipped by rail and not by truck. Some portions of the country, especially in the west, were barely navigable.

The interstate changed all this and more. Today it is simultaneously prized for the ease of mobility it creates while derided for the rush-hour gridlock that commuters must slog through. It is a cause of awe for its engineering feats and the convenience they have brought, and reviled for the urban sprawl and environmental damage it has wrought. It is, in short, a monument to American ingenuity and shortsightedness. This paper seeks to briefly explore the origins of this national highway building program, while focusing specifically on the five highways that were built within the corporation limits of the city of Chicago from 1940 to 1960. As such, it will show the

similarities and differences of the Chicago experience relative to the national experience, and will show that the construction of each of these highways was quite a different affair.

Overview of the National Interstate System¹

Although the federal government first became involved in national highway planning with the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1916, it would be a full forty years until the passage of the Federal Highway Act of 1956, the legislation that gave rise to the interstate highway system as we know it today. The 1916 act appropriated federal matching funds to states to construct a network of rural farm-to-market roads by 1921. This effort was in part based on the experience of moving goods during the First World War, during which the railroads had become overburdened and the potential of using trucks as a substitute became increasingly more viable. The 1916 legislation was supplemented by the Federal Aid Act of 1921 which sought to logically connect the network of interurban roads. The coupled achievement of these two acts created a system of paved two or four lane roads that permitted regular, albeit frequently

¹ Richard O. Davies. The Age of Asphalt: The Automobile, the Freeway, and the Condition of Metropolitan America. (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1975), 7-15.

interrupted, travel from city to city in an expedient manner.

Throughout the 1930s, this building program was broadened to include urban roads as well.

The looming crisis of the Second World War piqued President Roosevelt's interest in including a defense component into national road building plans. Initially, Roosevelt envisioned six highways, three north-south and three east-west, to be built as four lane divided toll roads stretching the length of the country. He also sought to include the concept of eminent domain in this plan, whereby the federal government could force the sale of lands it desired to include in the highway system. These ideas were incorporated in the first federally supported study of a national highway system, entitled *Toll Roads and Free Roads*, promulgated by the Bureau of Public Roads. Despite contradictory prevailing wisdom, in this master plan the idea of a toll system was outright rejected, based on the idea that most drivers would be unwilling or unable to pay such tolls on a regular basis and that the roads would therefore not be economically viable. Instead, it called for the six interregional highways totaling 14,336 miles, roughly equivalent in placement to those suggested by Roosevelt. In some cases, older roads were to be upgraded, in other areas entirely new roads were to be built. To facilitate high speed travel, curves were to be softened and sight lines were to be increased. Recognizing the ever-increasing numbers of automobile

registrations and the growing problem of urban congestion, where ninety percent of all travel occurred, the plan advocated the inclusion of urban highways cutting into and through the city centers in addition to rural highways.²

Although the Second World War and its pressing needs for manpower and supplies prevented any actual construction, highway planning remained a high government priority. In 1941, Roosevelt created the Inter-regional Highway Committee to create a master plan for postwar highway building. This Committee recommended a network of roadways connecting urban centers to thirty-four thousand miles of rural expressways. Additionally, under this proposal, highway building was coupled to stemming of urban decentralization and touted slum clearance as a means of halting inner city decay, a notion that would gain great popularity in the following decade. Congress endorsed these recommendations with the Federal Highway Act of 1944, and while no funds were appropriated at that time, nor was the fifty-fifty funding ratio changed, this act provided the framework for the Interstate and Defense Highway System of 1956.

During the first decade after the cessation of hostilities, the government was focused on first the return to a civilian economy, and later on the war in Korea. It therefore took little action toward road building. However, a number of unrelated factors led government

² U. S. Bureau of Public Roads. Toll Roads and Free Roads. (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1939), 89, 102, 114.

officials to believe that a national interstate system was urgently needed and a manner of creating it needed to be found. During this time, automobile sales soared far ahead of anyone's predictions, and the increased levels of traffic created intense urban gridlock problems. Military officials were also growing concerned about defense mobility and urban evacuation in these tense early years of the atomic age. Finally, and perhaps more importantly, the influence of what came to be known as the "Highway Lobby" strong-armed legislators into undertaking the gargantuan task of creating a national interstate system.

This group, a loosely but not officially interconnected network of lobbyists representing the interests of petroleum, rubber, trucking, automobile manufacturers, and related industries such as steel, put intense pressure upon the government to build the roadway, while simultaneously waging a public relations campaign to convince the populace that the interstate was desperately needed. In President Eisenhower, who took office in 1953, they had a powerful friend. Eisenhower had been impressed during the Second World War by how much easier troop movement was once the army crossed from France into Germany and could make use of Hitler's Autobahn, and saw the advantages of having a like system here. To study the possibility of creating such a system, he appointed, with the blessing of the Highway Lobby, a special advisory committee headed by General

Lucius Clay. Clay, completely prohighway himself, stocked the committee with representatives from the Highway Lobby, and then proceeded to hold hearings at which he only permitted proponents of highway building to testify.

The findings of the Clay Committee, submitted to Eisenhower in early 1955, therefore bore no surprises. The need for a rural network was a given. The necessity of this system running through city centers was further touted as the sole means for relieving urban congestion problems. Alternative forms of transportation, such as subway, rail, bus, or air, were not considered. The sprawl of the modern city and its suburbs needed to be accommodated, and the automobile was the preferred means of transportation to do this. Additionally, highways were viewed as the most viable solution to the problems of urban revitalization and slum clearance available. The only real issue left to be confronted was the question of how to fund such a project, and the committee was firmly opposed to a toll system as a means of achieving this.

These recommendations came to a head with twin acts passed by Congress in 1956. The Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956 authorized \$25 billion for twelve years to create a nation system of interstate and defense highways. These roads, forty-one thousand miles in all, were to be limited access, divided, and built to rigorous standards. Funding was to be provided by means of the Highway

Revenue Act. This bill called for revenue collection by levying taxes on gasoline, diesel fuel, lubricating oils, tires, and heavy trucks. These revenues would flow into a Highway Trust Fund, kept apart from the rest of the federal budget, and, significantly, to be used on only new construction.

Overview of the Chicago Highway System

Beside the federal government, however, state and local government bodies were also planning and building highways prior to 1956. Certainly, the most outstanding achievement along these lines was that of the Pennsylvania Turnpike, built between 1938 and 1940, in part with federal funds. This was a modern, four laned, limited access highway that stretched the length of the state. An engineering marvel for its day, it cut through, instead of following, the curves of mountains and valleys, creating a more or less level and straight path through the state's rugged terrain. The actions of Pennsylvania inspired planners in Indiana, Ohio, New Jersey, New York, and Kansas to also embark on turnpike projects, displaying an amazing level of cooperation among themselves. By 1955, a driver could travel along

these roads from Chicago to New York City, some 780 miles, without ever encountering a stop light or cross traffic.³

Local planners, seeking to relieve traffic congestion within metropolitan areas, also began planning for intraurban expressways. Chicago, the nation's second largest city at the time, proved to be a visionary and a leader in this regard. The history of express highways in Chicago dated from 1906, when the great city planner Daniel H. Burnham conceived of an expressway stretching westward from the Loop (the common nickname for Chicago's central business district (CBD)). A credit to the city's tenacity to the realization of this goal, the local government negotiated an agreement in 1929 with the United States Post Office to leave a portal for the expressway roadbed when it built a new central post office over the proposed pathway of this expressway.⁴ Real planning began, however, in 1939 when the City Council and the Department of Subways and Superhighways created the Joint City Council Subcommittee on Superhighways. This body was charged with creating a master plan for the creation of a highway system within the city limits.

Later that same year, the Subcommittee submitted its first report, entitled *A Comprehensive Superhighway Plan for the City of Chicago*, after which the City Council held a series of public hearings

³ Tom Lewis. Divided Highways: Building the Interstate Highways, Transforming American Life. (New York: Penguin, 1997), 55-59.

⁴ Chicago Tribune, Mar. 27, 1956.

with civic organizations and interested citizens to discuss the report's proposed plans. The Council then relayed the findings of the public hearings back to the Subcommittee for incorporation into a revised plan. This supplemental report was in turn submitted to the City Council on February 16, 1940 and ratified later that year.⁵ The crux of the report was the proposal of six highways radiating outward from the Loop, with a seventh that would join the three westernmost routes to each other in a north-south fashion. The spirit of this plan was later incorporated by federal interstate planners at the United States Bureau of Public Roads in their *General Location of National System of Interstate Highways*.⁶

The proposed seven routes were as follows:

North Route - an extension of Lake Shore Drive north along the lake front to the city limits.

Northwest Route - to run from Wacker Drive along the general lines of Clybourn and Elston Avenues to Bryn Mawr Avenue.

West Route - to run from Grant Park along Congress Street to the city limits.

Southwest Route - to follow the general path of Archer Avenue and the abandoned Illinois and Michigan Canal to the city limits.

South Route - to run from Wacker Drive along the general lines of Franklin Street and Union Avenue to 95th Street.

⁵ Chicago Tribune. Numerous articles from 1940.

⁶ U. S. Bureau of Public Roads. General Location of National System of Interstate Highways, 1955.

Southeast Route - an extension of Lake Shore Drive south along the lake front to the Indiana state line.

Cross-town Route - to follow the general line of California Avenue and connect the Southwest, West, and Northwest Routes.

The plan called for the West Route to be given priority because Congress Street had the greatest need for improvement and the greatest amount of congestion.⁷ An amendment adopted in 1945 called for work on the South Route to be delayed because of a housing shortage on the South Side, which would be alleviated by public housing.⁸ A more ambitious 1946 plan called for, in addition to the roads proposed in 1940, an outer ring road at the city's southern and western boundaries, a Cross Town Route that truly crossed the entire town from north to south, and a second Southeast Route to Indiana. This plan was never adopted.

With some exceptions, most of the 1940 plan was actually executed. Lake Shore Drive was indeed extended both northward and southward, but not to the city's borders, as had been envisioned. Nor was this road, although built as a multilane, divided, limited access highway, ever incorporated into the federal interstate system.

However, an alternate Southeast Route was built, following the

⁷ Chicago, Ill. Department of Subways and Superhighways. Report on a Comprehensive Superhighway Plan for the City of Chicago. 1939 and Chicago, Ill. Department of Subways and Superhighways. Report on a Comprehensive Superhighway Plan for the City of Chicago. 1940.

⁸ Chicago, Ill. Journal of the Proceedings of the City Council of the City of Chicago, April 23, 1945.

general path of the second Southeast Route of the 1946 proposal. The Cross Town Route, which was to be built last, never came to fruition, falling victim to the general backlash against urban highway building during the 1960s.⁹ The remaining four roads were built essential as proposed over the next two and a half decades.

The West Route was originally called the Congress Expressway, but later renamed the Eisenhower Expressway (I-290). The Northwest Route was named the Kennedy Expressway in honor of President Kennedy (I-90/94 from downtown to the Edens Expressway, and I-90 thereafter). The Southwest Route was named after Adlai Stevenson, a former Illinois governor and twice-defeated presidential candidate (I-55). The South Route was named in honor of Cook County Board President Dan Ryan (I-90/94 from downtown until the Southeast Route splits off from it, then I-90 until it splits again, becoming I-57 in the west and I-90, originally the Calumet and now the Bishop Ford Freeway, in the east). The Southeast Route is known as the Chicago Skyway (I-94). The first four highways are connected by a link which parallels Halsted Street (built on what had been Union Avenue) through the CBD and converge on a giant circular interchange at Congress Street just west

⁹ This is not to say that the need for such a route disappeared however. As recently as November 26, 2002, the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) was proposing building a rail and possible truck route along the very corridor proposed for the Cross Town Route, according to an article in The Red Eye of that date.

of the river. As part of the overall plan, improvements were made to Ontario and Ohio streets to serve as additional feeder routes from the Halsted link, and to Wacker Drive in the form of extending and double decking this roadway.

From the beginning, the City of Chicago worked closely with Cook County and the State of Illinois to coordinate road building efforts. All routes which led out of the city within Illinois linked up to a toll highway being built by the state, and all bodies agreed that routes leading to and from the CBD were a higher priority than urban ring roads. Once federal funding began with the passage of the highway act of 1956, these three bodies continued to work cooperatively in the regional planning and execution of expressway construction. Additionally, expenses and construction responsibilities were shared between the three bodies on a number of the routes.¹⁰

In many ways, the building of highways in Chicago was typical of the general American experience. Work moved slowly until federal funding kicked in in 1956. The demolition of neighborhoods, especially for the Northwest, West, and South Routes involved the dislocation of numerous families. For a number of reasons, the South Route, built last and mirroring the histories of other urban routes elsewhere, saw a number of protests from local residents. Route placement had something to do with access to the area's airports, and

¹⁰ Chicago Tribune. Numerous articles describe the three bodies working in close conjunction with each other on these projects.

both O'Hare and Midway were included from the beginning as integral components of highway placement. Other features were unique to the Chicago experience, the foremost being the inclusion of mass transit in the overall highway plan. The North, West, and South routes were all built with rail lines included in the right-of-way. This had also been anticipated for the Southwest Route, but was instead realized with the construction of the Chicago Transit Authority's (CTA) Orange Line, placed slightly further south along abandoned railway lines.

From the beginning, planners prioritized certain routes over others. At first, the Eisenhower and Stevenson were given highest priority, the former because of congestion in the western portion of the city, and the latter as a means of linking the CBD with Midway Airport and U.S. Route 66, then the most heavily traveled highway in the country. Later, however, the Kennedy was given priority over the Stevenson because of the construction and opening of O'Hare Airport and the need to create an express link between it and the CBD.¹¹ As late as the mid-1950s, planners were calling for an emphasis on acquisition and clearance of rights-of-way for the North, Northwest

¹¹ The site of the Douglas Aircraft assembly plant was chosen for the city's new international airport in 1945, and opened to commercial air traffic in 1955 (About O'Hare: Then and Now. http://www.ohare.com/ohare/about/timeline/ohare_timeline.shtm, accessed Nov. 30, 2002)

and West routes while delaying any but “incidental and necessary” acquisition for the South, Southwest, and Cross Town routes.¹²

As was generally true with all of the highways that were built in developed areas, the first challenge encountered was the acquisition of property in the right-of-way and demolition of any buildings on those properties.¹³ This was generally carried out by having the property in question appraised and then negotiating a fair settlement with the owner. If the properties were residential, the city made efforts to help the displaced families relocate to new premises. This was no small project in and of itself. Over a thousand parcels of property each were acquired for the Kennedy and Ryan expressways. In numerous instances there were title disputes concerning given properties. As might also be expected, a number of scandals erupted in which it was discovered that property owners were gouging the government on the assumed value of their properties. If a sale price could not be agreed upon by both the owner and the purchasing government body, then a condemnation suit needed to be filed in

¹² Illinois. Department of Public Works. Report to State of Illinois, Department of Public Works and Buildings, Division of Highways and Highway Improvements, Long-Range Plan, 1952-1956 inclusive, 1952, 4 and Illinois. Department of Public Works. Report to State of Illinois, Department of Public Works and Buildings, Division of Highways and Highway Improvements, Long-Range Plan, 1953-1957 inclusive, 1952, 4. The Skyway, or southeast route, is included in the 1955-1959 inclusive report.

¹³ Because the acquisition of rights-of-way was similar for all the highways, the general history will be dealt with in this section only. Specific details in the history of a given highway will be discussed in the pertinent section.

court and a court order to sell would be issued. Often this ploy was used by the owners to get the government to up its offer to speed up acquisition and clearance of needed lands.

Another frequently encountered problem with razing properties in the future path of the highway was from looters. As the three government bodies acquired the necessary properties, they contracted with independent wreckers to do the actual demolition work. These contracts were negotiated with the wreckers agreeing to pay the governments for the right to demolish the buildings with the assumption that they would make a profit on materials salvaged from the structures, such as plumbing, fixtures, pipes, radiators, and refrigerators. However, it was frequently the case that looters would raid the abandoned buildings as soon as they were emptied and begin stripping them. Some cases were even reported of looters entering buildings while units were still occupied or while a family was in the process of moving to their new home. Wreckers would obviously bid less on stripped properties, which drove up the final cost of acquiring properties to the governments. Literally hundreds of looters were arrested during the course of the highway construction project.

Eisenhower Expressway¹⁴

¹⁴ The specific histories of the five roadways, unless otherwise mentioned, is gleaned from numerous Chicago Tribune articles published between 1940 and 1960. One seminal source is a seven-part series of articles printed on March 26-31, 1956.

As mentioned above, the Eisenhower was the first expressway on which work was begun. As early as 1946, the City of Chicago put out bids for the removal of twenty-eight buildings between State Street and the river.¹⁵ Responsibility for the construction of this roadway, however, was ultimately shared by the city, the state, and Cook County, with each body building and funding different sections of the project. Typical with most urban highways being built through already settled areas, a great number of obstacles needed to be overcome for the successful completion of the project, and, because it was one of the first urban highways to be built in the country, a number of oddities, relative to other modern urban expressways, cropped up.

The acquisition of the rights-of-way for this roadway involved wrangling with the federal government over an office building in the South Loop, as well as with the United States Post Office over the arcade in their main building. Despite that particular building having been designed to accommodate a highway through it when it was built in the 1930s, the Post Office now felt that building such a road would interfere with the ability of mail trucks to reach the building with ease. This was eventually solved by agreements with the federal government to make further alterations to the building to allow

¹⁵ Chicago, Ill. Department of Subways and Superhighways. Removal of 28 Buildings and Placing Fill in Basements: Section Congress Street 2424.4-W, 1946, 1.

ingress and egress for the trucks. In perhaps the most-grisly of all right-of-way acquisitions concerning Chicago area roadways, tracts of two Forest Park cemeteries were condemned and over two thousand bodies were reburied elsewhere after extensive efforts were made to contact surviving family members, both domestically and abroad.

Being the only expressway to actually run through the CBD, a number of other radical plans were implemented to accommodate this. Wacker Drive was extended south to meet up with Congress Street. In addition, it was newly reconstructed with an upper and lower level to aid in the movement of traffic, with a half cloverleaf interchange to link the terminus of the highway to the lower portion of the road. Prior to the highway's construction, Congress Street ran only from Michigan Avenue to State Street east of the river. Between State Street and the post office was a built-up business district, the clearance of which was made more difficult due to the presence of three different train stations (LaSalle, Grand Central, and Dearborn) and their associated track work. All three stations were determined at the time to be antiquated and insufficient for current needs. These stations were eventually consolidated into a reconfigured LaSalle Street Station which permitted the roadway to move at ground level beneath the tracks.

East of Wacker Drive, the Eisenhower becomes a six to eight lane street as opposed to a limited access superhighway. This type of

solution was also used in part on the Ohio and Ontario Street feeder ramps from the Halsted Street link north of the Loop, but would be avoided in later construction, such as the link between Halsted Street and Lake Shore Drive on the Stevenson, which was built as a limited access highway. East of State Street, Congress Street needed to be widened from four lanes to six. This was complicated because of the existence of landmark buildings which laid in its path. Instead of condemning such property, it was decided to create an arcaded pedestrian sidewalk running beneath the buildings and abutting the roadway. In order to create a link through to Lake Shore Drive, Congress Street was also extended into Grant Park.

The Eisenhower was built as one of three area superhighways to include CTA railway tracks through its median strip. This type of railway passage is known as an “open cut” railway. A complicating factor in this instance, however, was the plan to link this railway to an extension of the Dearborn Street subway, which required the placement of two subway tunnels beneath the main post office. This, in turn, caused delays because construction of the highway could not begin until the CTA had first finished its portion of the construction.

In the case of the Eisenhower, the city, state, and county worked on their portions of the roadway at differing paces and thus segments of the roadway were opened to traffic at different times. The first segment, built by the county and opened in 1954 in suburban

Bellwood and Maywood, was essentially a highway to nowhere when it was opened. Yet almost immediately it exceeded traffic projections, showing the public's enthusiasm for the expressway system. Then final segment was completed in the early 1960s.¹⁶

Kennedy Expressway

The story of the Northwest Route involved a major legal battle involving the Illinois Toll Road Commission, the county, the city, and numerous citizens' interest groups. The general route of the highway had been outlined in the 1940 plan, running from the Halsted link north to Lake Street, and then following either Clybourn Avenue or Elston Street to Bryn Mawr Avenue. This plan was later expanded to include a link to the Edens Expressway and a western segment along Bryn Mawr to O'Hare Airport, to insert reversible express lanes in the center median from the CBD to the Edens, and to reserve the median strip for an open-cut railway for the CTA to provide rail service to the airport as well. During the 1940s there was some debate between the city and the county on whether to follow a route east of the river (Clybourn) or west of the river (Elston), with the city favoring the west side path and the county the east side path. The main issues of this debate were that the east side path, although it would be longer, would place motorists closer to the downtown area. Eventually it was

¹⁶ Chicago Tribune. June 29, 1949, June 28, 1955, July 29, 1955, August 19, 1955, November 2, 1956, etc.

decided to go with the west side plan but to build mile long bridges along Ontario and Ohio streets from the highway to Orleans Street to permit rapid access to the northern part of the CBD. As with the Eisenhower and Stevenson, the Kennedy was built and paid for by the city, county, and state.

As part of its commitment to the program, Cook County acquired a seven-mile right-of-way extending generally along Bryn Mawr Avenue from Cicero Avenue to the city's borders. This portion of the road was to serve as the Edens to O'Hare link. The legal problems began in late 1955 when the county ran short of funds and could not actually build the highway. Instead, the right-of-way was sold to the state for inclusion in a toll way project which would run from the airport and Tri-State Tollway to Rockford and Beloit, Wisconsin. Two major problems with this plan immediately cropped up. First, residents and businesses in the city's northwest side claimed that they were being unfairly discriminated against because they would be forced to use a toll way, while other neighborhoods would have freeways running through their parts of the city. Additionally, these groups were angered that the roads in general were being funded by tax levies, and in having to use a toll way they in essence would be paying twice, first their share for all the expressways and, additionally, the extra toll charge. As such, a number of law suits were filed against the Commission and the county

to block the sale of the right-of-way. Secondly, the Illinois Toll Road Act, passed several years before, stipulated that competing forms of transportation could not operate in any of its rights-of-way, as this would siphon off the potential toll revenues which were used to fund the project.

A number of alternatives were proposed to solve these issues, including running rail lines near-by or leaving the median strip empty and having the Commission sell the strip back to the county upon completion of the highway. In a later proposal, the state offered to build the road with the median empty, and then, upon completion, sell then entire seven miles of roadway back to the county. Mayor Daley, however, objected to these plans, expressing concerns that the Commission's bond holders, who would have to approve such a sale, might later decide against it, and that the bond holders should not have it within their power to impose a toll road on the city. Daley also claimed that the county did have enough money to fund such a construction project. By mid-1956 an agreement had been worked out by all parties involved. The final solution was to let the Commission build the road and leave the median strip empty for the CTA. While construction was under way, the county would divert funds set aside for the Southwest Route to an escrow account, which

would be used to purchase the highway upon completion at the end of 1958.¹⁷

Skyway

The Skyway is unique amongst the five interstates within the city limits in a number of ways. It holds the distinction of being the only toll expressway ever built within the city limits. It is also the only road to be built due to an unanticipated crisis, and therefore represents a colossal failure of interstate cooperation. And, finally, it is also the only expressway that is technically not an expressway at all, but rather a bridge.

The story of the Skyway begins with planning for the Tri-State Tollway, designed to link Chicago to Detroit. Michigan was to build a toll road from Detroit west to St. Joseph/Benton Harbor, and then south to link up with the Indiana Tollroad, which would run across the northern portion of that state from the Illinois border to meet up with the Ohio Turnpike in the east. In accordance with this plan, the State of Illinois built the Kingery Expressway, running west from the Indiana border.¹⁸ It also built access into Chicago along the Calumet Expressway, which was to link eventually to the South Route, as it

¹⁷ Chicago Tribune. June 29, 1954, August 28, 1954, November 23, 1954, December 13, 1955, February 17, 1956, February 18, 1956, March 3, 1956, March 24, 1956, etc.

¹⁸ This road today comprises I-80 between I-294 (the Tri-State) and the Indiana border.

does today. The Illinois Toll Road Commission opted for this plan because it did not wish to commandeer the city's expressway planning. Furthermore, studies it conducted concluded that a toll road could not be profitably built through urban areas due to the high cost of acquiring built up properties. Instead, the Commission's planning focused on by-pass routes and avoided going through urban areas.

The Indiana Toll Road Commission, in its own studies, found however that only 14 percent of the anticipated traffic on its road would want to use a by-pass route, with the other 86 percent seeking direct access to Chicago's CBD. Accordingly, after spending over a decade raising funds and building a three mile link from the Kingery Expressway at the Illinois border to Indianapolis Boulevard (U.S. Route 41) in Hammond, they decided in 1953 to scrap these plans and instead end their road at 106th Street and Indianapolis boulevard, nine miles further north.¹⁹ This dramatic change of tact called for running a toll way through a built up urban area instead of farm lands, and for running the expressway both through Wolf Lake Park and over Wolf Lake itself. More importantly, from the perspective of the City of Chicago, this new terminus would dump excessive amounts

¹⁹ U.S. Route 41 eventually becomes Lake Shore Drive in Chicago, thus making Indianapolis Boulevard at either location a logical connecting point for both the Kingery Highway and for the Indiana Tollway.

of traffic into an already heavily congested area. Indiana planned to have this roadway completed by the end of 1956.

Despite formal protests at both the city and state level, Indiana refused to back down on its change of plans. This called for immediate and drastic action on the part of the city, led by George De Ment, then acting commissioner of public works. Thus, Chicago officials conceived of a plan to build a highway along the lines of an already existing embankment of the Pennsylvania Railroad tracks from 106th Street and Indiana Boulevard over the Calumet River to 60th and State streets, where it would link up with the future South Route. This plan was later revised so that the terminus would be at 66th Street instead, avoiding the added cost of building over a train yard located between the two points in question. Funding for the project was to be accomplished by floating a forty-year bond and to be paid off with tolls collected from this roadway. There was, however, one major glitch to the scheme.

Under an amendment to the state code enacted in 1953, Chicago was authorized to build toll bridges and their approaches, but only the Illinois Toll Road Commission, created by this same legislative session, had the authority to build toll roads. Therefore, from a legal standpoint, the Skyway became technically a toll bridge over the Calumet River and not a toll way. As such, a number of anomalies occurred to lend the appearance of a bridge way. The

road was built on fill between 14 and 125 feet above ground level. As a bridge, access points would by nature be limited. In fact, there are only two interchanges between the Ryan and the Indiana border, one at the westernmost end at State Street, and one roughly midway through the route at Stony Island Avenue, creating direct access to Lake Shore Drive, something akin to the original 1940 highway plan. Tolls, as might be expected for a bridge, were collected at only one point on the route, at 87th Street and Colfax Avenue. The bridge design itself was also unique for Chicago. With an overall length of 1,300 feet and a central span of 650 feet, it was three times longer than any existing bridge in the area. Its 125-foot clearance was roughly 100 feet higher than the average Chicago bridge and was designed so that the largest of freight ships could pass beneath it, obviating the need to interrupt land traffic with a raising bridge to accommodate the increasingly busy Calumet Harbor. This highway was completed in 1959, a little over two years after the Indiana project.²⁰

Stevenson Expressway

From the beginning, planners viewed the Stevenson as the most trouble free of all the routes to build. This was because the site of the right-of-way chosen for the road was actually a defunct canal believed

²⁰ Chicago Tribune. December 18, 1953, September 12, 1954, September 15, 1954, March 29, 1956, August 25, 1956, etc.

initially to be owned by the state. Therefore, both land acquisition and clearance were not perceived to be a potential problem. As stated above, this route was also originally given a high priority because it would ease congestion on the two “wagon wheel” southwest roads from the CBD, namely Ogden Avenue, which was the eastern terminus of Route 66, and Archer Avenue, which provided the most direct link from the CBD to the area’s airport. Over time, however, priorities changed and difficulties arose in land acquisition, causing the road’s completion to be delayed until late 1964.

Proposals for an “expressway” along this southwest route amazingly dated back to 1682, when the French explorer LaSalle proposed the building of a canal on the path of an Indian trail which served as the portage from the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River system to the Illinois and Mississippi River systems. With this need still unmet a century and a half later, the state appealed to the federal government for the right to survey and construct a canal along this path, which was at that point federal land. Title was granted in 1822 for this project and included the canal bed plus a 90-foot border on either side of the bed. Unfortunately, the state had difficulty financing the project almost from the beginning, so in 1827 the federal government enlarged the swath of land to a width of five miles, with the canal to be placed in the center. Under this deal, the land was divided into even and odd numbered parcels, with the

federal government retaining the even numbered parcels and the odd numbered ones going to the state. Both bodies sold off their portions of the strip which laid beyond the 90-foot median, with state proceeds going toward the funding of the canal project. The canal, known as the Illinois and Michigan Canal (or I&M Canal) was finally completed in 1848 and ran ninety-six miles from the south branch of the Chicago River at Ashland Avenue to the Illinois River at the town of LaSalle. It served as a major area transportation route until it was abandoned in 1907, having been superseded by the deep bed Illinois Sanitary and Ship Canal, which ran slightly to the north of the I&M Canal and was more suited to modern shipping vessels.

The proposed Southwest Route would follow the old canal's path from the western boundaries of the city, where a link would be made to Route 66, to the canal's end at Ashland Avenue. From that point eastward the highway would continue due east and link up with the South Route at roughly Union Avenue (the proposed north-south street placement for this route) and 28th Street. This was later extended further so that the highway would end instead at 22nd Street and Lake Shore Drive. Two major glitches appeared with these proposals almost immediately.

The first problem was that the area between Ashland and Union Avenues was primarily occupied by the Santa Fe, Gulf, Mobile, and Ohio, and Illinois Central railroads as a train yard as well as a freight

terminal for fruit and produce shipments. During the 1920s, the state and the railroads had engaged in a protracted legal battle for title to these lands, with the arguments offered stemming back to the 19th Century even/odd parceling of these lands. In an agreement reached in 1928, the railroads gave the state part of the land in question in exchange for a barge terminal on the Sanitary and Ship Canal, but during the 1940s state's attorneys argued that this agreement was in violation of the state's constitution. These issues were eventually solved when highway engineers devised a plan whereby the expressway would run on the canal bed until Ashland Avenue, and then rise above the ground into an elevated expressway over the railroad yards until meeting up with the South Route. The highway building bodies also came to loggerheads over who would pay for a variety of features over this latest proposal, with the railroads arguing that the highway would be of no benefit to them and that they therefore should not be expected to fund it. In the end, construction was so delayed that the federal interstate act had been passed and the federal government picked up the tab on the bulk of the project.

The other major obstacle encountered in building this road was that the proposed pathway was in fact not completely cleared. This was an important consideration in the immediate postwar years, when great housing shortages were created by enlisted men returning home and planners were loath to make the situation worse than it already

was by displacing more people needlessly. In addition to the railroad yards, some sections of the right-of-way east of Ashland Avenue were built up as neighborhoods, and a number of buildings needed to be acquired and demolished, including at least one church. More surprisingly, however, was the community of about one thousand residents leasing lands from the state either on parts of the I&M canal bed which had been filled in over the years by illegal dumping or on the banks of the remaining unfilled portions of the canal, as well as on the banks of the Sanitary and Ship Canal. The residents of this community, dubbed "Canalville", were not squatters, but instead home owners who had built on lands legally leased from the state. Despite this, the bulk of the residences there were little more than shanties with no running water, bathroom facilities, or electricity. Eventually, they too needed to be relocated.

Over the years, the urgency to build the Southwest Route diminished. The first serious reprioritizing came with the opening of O'Hare Airport, which eclipsed the urgency for an express route to Midway Airport. Instead, planners focused on building the Northwest Route to create access to the new airport. When funds were needed to purchase the rights-of-way between the Edens junction and the airport from the state in order to keep the route toll free, it was from the funds set aside for the Stevenson that these monies were taken.

The crisis instigated by the Indiana Toll Road Commission also served to lessen the priority of the Southwest route.

Thus, the “easiest” of all the highways to be built actually opened last, on October 24, 1964. However, unlike with the other roads, the state, county, and city coordinated their building efforts far more closely this time. By doing so, they were able to finish work on the main route from Halsted Street to the county line a year earlier than originally anticipated. Additionally, work had been done by the three bodies simultaneously, allowing the entire roadway to open at one time.²¹ Work on the final extension, from Halsted Street to 22nd Street and Lake Shore Drive, was completed the following year.²²

Dan Ryan Expressway

An expressway leading directly south of the Loop had been envisioned in the city’s comprehensive highway plan from nearly the beginning, but the nature of its structure and its exact placement was the subject of much controversy at the time, and even today there are some who claim that the roadway was placed where it was to keep the black neighborhoods from encroaching into the white ones. Although no source materials state this quite so explicitly, there is a fair amount

²¹ Cook County Highways, 12 (October 1964): 4-5.

²² Chicago Tribune. July 13, 1947, July 16, 1947, July 22, 1947, December 20, 1947, July 17, 1949, August 18, 1949, September 28, 1949, October 13, 1949, etc.

of circumstantial evidence to suggest that this might partly be the case.

While all five Chicago highways necessitated some amount of demolition work and the relocation of families and businesses, the South Route definitely outdistanced the other routes in these areas, permanently intertwining its history with the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) and its grand plans of slum clearance and urban revitalization. Because expressway construction and urban renewal were both hot topics during the decades of the 1940s and 1950s, it is difficult to discern whether these two concepts worked together hand-in-hand or were in fact competing interests of the times.

That the South Side had become blighted by the postwar era is certainly borne out by numerous studies. One CHA report, detailing the costs of acquiring blighted neighborhoods for redevelopment, includes a map of such areas. Except for a two block stretch around 42nd Street, all of the properties that were eventually acquired for the construction of the Ryan Expressway are listed as being blighted.²³ Another report, investigating the area bounded by Lake Park Avenue, 29th Street, Federal Street, and 34th Street, found between 70 percent to 99 percent of the buildings exhibited at least one “substantial quality” of deterioration, including such indicators as

²³ Chicago, Ill. Chicago Housing Authority. Demonstration of a Technique for Estimating Land Costs in Deteriorated Neighborhoods, 1948, 1 and 13.

crumbling foundations, caving exterior walls, unsafe roofs, broken stairways, or the presence of fire hazards.²⁴ Another report, citing the housing stock to be cleared for a new housing project at 27th and State streets, found all the homes to be infested with rats and listed other problems such as no gas, electricity, baths, or toilets in ranges of 16 percent and 47 percent of the structures. Fully 90 percent were being heated by unsafe means.²⁵ Similar conditions were also found in a “typical” dwelling in another study of the block bounded by 35th, Vernon, 37th, and Rhodes streets.²⁶

One major aspect of urban highway building, of course, was the necessity of clearing properties in the rights-of-way. From the beginning, Chicago planners were amply aware that this undertaking would be greatest on the South Route. One study estimated that nearly 5,000 would need to be relocated for the South Route, compared to about 4,500 for the Northwest Route and 3,500 for the West Route. Similarly, the number of other establishments needing relocation for the South Route nearly equaled the combined total for the Northwest and North routes.²⁷ The postwar housing shortage and

²⁴ Chicago, Ill. Chicago Housing Authority. Report on Relocation Survey for Illinois Institute of Technology and Michael Reese Hospital Clearance Areas, 1947, iii and ix.

²⁵ Chicago, Ill. Chicago Housing Authority. Memorandum on Relocation: Chicago Housing Authority Experience, 1948, 5.

²⁶ Chicago, Ill. Chicago Housing Authority. Is Rehabilitation Possible?, 1946, 5.

²⁷ Chicago, Ill. Department of Subways and Superhighways. Report on the South-Southwest Superhighways, 1952, unpagged.

CHA projects either proposed, underway, or completed were factors in the placement and construction of this roadway, as was the desire to disrupt as little as possible in order to create a minimum of hardship as well as to drive acquisitions costs down.

As stated above, the original 1940 plan called for the South Route to run essentially along the general line of Franklin (300W) and Union (700W) streets.²⁸ Since the Halsted Street link to the west of the Loop was built between Halsted and Union, this plan would have resulted in the highway more or less running due south of the link to 95th Street. In 1955, however, Mayor Daley asked engineers to investigate moving the highway eastward south of Roosevelt Road into the rights-of-way of the Chicago and Eastern Illinois and Chicago and Western Indiana railroads (about 400W). This would involve a slight east/west leg at about 26th Street, where it would intersect with the Southwest Route. He stated that the railroads were amenable to the proposal and that it would be possible to begin construction much sooner without there being the burden of the cost of acquiring and demolishing buildings or legal contests from owners.

The proposal that the engineers returned called for three parallel elevated T-shaped roadways running from 26th to 50th streets over Shields (328W) and Princeton (300W) avenues, Wells

²⁸ Chicago, Ill. Department of Subways and Superhighways. Supplemental Report on a Comprehensive Superhighway Plan for the City of Chicago, 1940, 2.

Street (220W), and Wentworth Avenue (200W) respectively. Parking at street level would move from the curbs to the center of the street, between the elevated roadway's pillars. With the adoption this plan instead of a conventional depressed highway, it was estimated that the project would be about 25 percent lower in costs, reduce construction time by three years, and create a minimum of disturbance to the surrounding neighborhoods. Each of the roadways would be three lanes wide, with the central path being reversible to accommodate rush hour traffic. At 50th Street the three would convene and follow the Wentworth path. Another proposal from the following year removed the center roadway and relocated the elevated outer routes to parallel the rights-of-way of the Pennsylvania and New York Central (about 400W and 100W respectively) railroads, again merging at 50th Street and following Wentworth until linking up with the Skyway at 66th Street, and then follow State Street (0E/W) to 99th Street.

The final 1957 proposal by the city's expressway engineers, however, is what was actually built. The Ryan Expressway opened to traffic on December 15, 1962 as a depressed highway with fourteen lanes between 28th and 47th streets, and ten lanes from 47th Street until the Skyway link at 67th Street. The path for this segment of the road was built over LaSalle Street (140W) and contained separate northbound and southbound "collector-distributor" lanes, commonly

referred to as express lanes today, in the center, in addition to the regular outer lanes for local traffic. These express and local roadways were separated with the aim of better accommodating through traffic and to eliminate weaving between lanes, which is lessened when there are fewer access points. Beyond 67th Street, the eight-lane highway follows the general line of State Street. A central median strip was left open for the CTA to build a rail line.²⁹³⁰

In the end, was the placement of this highway racially motivated? A Chicago Tribune article from October 28, 1957 cites the right-of-way from 35th Street to Pershing Road as “a jungle of slums” consisting of “a mixture of dilapidated houses and two flat buildings, junk ridden backyards and vacant lots, and rows of alley shacks.” In 1954, the CHA had selected the site as a location for a housing project. Most of the housing projects built on the near South Side were eventually constructed east of the New York Central Railroad. While it is impossible to determine with certainty if race played a factor in the site selection for this highway, it can be noted that the neighborhoods west of the train tracks were over 90 percent white when planning began, and those east of the tracks were nearly 100 percent of “a race other than white”.³¹

²⁹ Cook County Highways, 10 (December 1962): 4.

³⁰ Chicago Tribune. September 14, 1955, December 19, 1955, March 29, 1956, March 15, 1957, April 25, 1957, October 28, 1957, etc.

³¹ Chicago, Ill. Plan Commission. Land Use in Chicago, 1943, v. 2, 221.

Conclusion

Interstate highways are a simple fact of modern American life. While the interstate continues to expand every year, little to none of this is in built up urban areas. As such, the highways are no longer changing the face of the nation's cities nor are they occupying the thoughts of most Americans. For the bulk of the populace, these are roads that have always been where they are and a metropolitan area without highways is unthinkable. A half century ago, this was not the case.

The story of the interstate is in some ways bittersweet. The system is certainly a monument to this nation's ability to successfully fund and execute large building projects. In addition, the roadways permit a degree of mobility that is vital for maintaining a modern and advanced society. At the same time, however, there is a downside. The highways did not solve the gridlock problems that the country experienced after the Second World War. If anything, it might have added to it. Certainly, it made Americans more dependent on automobiles and in some cities spelled the ruin and abandonment of public transportation systems. Placement of a noisy and dirty highway in an urban neighborhood forever altered those areas, typically for the worse, and placement of the highway in rural areas often degraded the environment.

The story of the interstate in Chicago both mirrors the national history and stands apart from it. Generic themes, such as the demolition and division of neighborhoods and protest movements causing planned roads to never be built, were encountered here as well. Goal of gridlock reduction or quick access to airports and suburbs also never came to fruition. However, it is to the city's credit that planners began addressing the growing transportation crisis by preparing for the highway system a decade and a half before the federal government and had actually begun to build the system before the highway act of 1956. Furthermore, three of Chicago's expressways included public transportation lines, which help to ease the traffic burden, to say nothing of reducing pollution levels and other tangential benefits. Chicago also incorporated quite a number of innovative features into its roadways, such as reversible traffic lanes and express lanes. And, most amusingly, the story of Chicago's expressways shows how only in the "City of Big Shoulders" is it possible to turn a post office into a portal, a canal into a highway, and a highway into a toll bridge!

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